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**Gender assignment in loan words in the history of Icelandic: A
synchronic and diachronic analysis**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Marc Pierce

Hans Boas

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Collin Laine Brown, B.A.

Report

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Abstract

Gender assignment in loan words in the history of Icelandic: A synchronic and diachronic analysis

Collin Laine Brown, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Marc Pierce

Some such as Schwink (2004) have analyzed diachronic developments in Germanic gender as a whole, while others like Steinmetz (1985, 2001) and Trosterud (2006) have looked at diachronic changes in grammatical gender in the North Germanic languages. Specifically within the history of Icelandic, Steinmetz and Trosterud both argue for a neuter-default gender system for Old Norse (and for Modern Icelandic). This report looks at loan words from the Old Norse period drawn from historical sources, such as the *Heimskringla* (History of the Kings of Norway) and *Laxdæla Saga*, and compares their gender assignment then with their gender in Modern Icelandic in order to see if any of their originally assigned genders changed in the modern language. That none of the loans analyzed in this report changed their gender assignment from neuter to masculine as in West Germanic supports Steinmetz' and Trosterud's notions of Icelandic having a neuter-default gender system. These findings also support Schwink's view (2004:99), when he writes that Icelandic's gender system remains relatively unchanged from that of Old Norse.

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I. Introduction

Researchers tend to consider nominal gender assignment in the older Germanic languages in a comparative manner, where the different gender assignment systems of the respective languages are compared across different language groups (e.g. the Old High German gender assignment system with that of Old English). Schwink (2004) is perhaps the best example of this diachronic study of nominal gender across different languages in the family. Researchers have also analyzed the differences in gender in the Germanic languages synchronically, such as Zubin and Köpcke's (1984) work on the gender system in modern German. Somewhat less common is the study of diachronic changes in nominal gender within one language. While some have used this approach, e.g. Salmons (1992) on historical German gender, there is no comparable work dealing with changes in gender assignment from Old Norse to Modern Icelandic. This report seeks to fill this gap partially by evaluating what the extant research on Germanic gender has claimed about the diachronic development of the Germanic (and specifically North Germanic) gender system. Having presented the previous research on this topic, this work will then turn to an analysis of loan words both in the Old Norse and modern Icelandic, consulting saga sources for the ON examples and the *Mörkuð íslensk málheid* (Tagged Icelandic Corpus) the modern language.

The (at least originally) foreign nature of loan words could show more clearly what role semantic, phonological, and morphological factors play in the determination of gender assignment. By analyzing the gender assignment of loan words in Icelandic over

time, the reader will be able to see if Icelandic nominal gender assignment has changed from the Old Norse period and if so, how this occurred.

II. Previous Research

Corbett writes that “gender is the most puzzling of the grammatical categories,” and notes that while it is absent in some languages, it is central and pervasive in others (Corbett 1991:1). Corbett further quotes Hockett’s (1958:231) definition of gender, “genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words.”¹ While gender can correspond to the actual physical gender of the noun (i.e. semantic gender assignment), it does not always do so and can also be based on groups of noun declensions. There are different kinds of gender systems in languages that have multiple genders. Some, such as Tamil, have a strict semantic gender system in which gender assignment always matches up with the semantic associations of nouns (Corbett 1991:8). In the case of Tamil, for instance, gods or male humans are masculine, goddesses and female humans are always feminine, and all other nouns are neuter (ibid.).

Other languages, such as Dyirbal, have four gender categories as shown below:

(Figure 1) Gender Assignment in Dyirbal

gender I (<i>bayi</i>)	male humans, non-human animates	
gender II (<i>balan</i>)	female humans, water, fire, fighting	
gender III (<i>balam</i>)	non-flesh food	
gender IV (<i>bala</i>)	residue	(Corbett 1991:16)

¹ Corbett also notes that the word *gender* originally derives from Latin *genus*-‘kind, sort’ (Corbett 1991:1).

As can be seen from the Dyirbal data above, “gender” *per se* oftentimes has more to do with semantic categories as a whole than with the actual physical gender (assuming that is possible) of a language’s nouns.

Many modern Indo-European languages have predominantly morphological gender systems, in which nominal genders are based more on declensional patterns than on semantic factors. However, semantic factors tend to still come into play, as in Russian, where semantic considerations are crucial for sex-differentiable nouns and declensional types are the most important for declinable nouns (Corbett 1991:40).²

Germanic gender assignment has been analyzed in multiple works, usually through a cross-linguistic lens. One of, perhaps the most, influential of these is Schwink’s (2004) *The third gender: Studies in the origin and history of Germanic grammatical gender*, which presents Germanic gender within the larger context of PIE gender assignment. Indeed, Schwink repeatedly draws on and uses examples from the older Germanic languages to demonstrate how Germanic gender came out of the original PIE noun classification system, as well as to account for the appearance of three genders in Germanic (as well as in Slavic). He also compares the more traditional view of PIE as having three genders with a PIE nominal classification system wherein the main nominal categories consisted of animate and inanimate classes. While applicable to the larger goal of Schwink’s work, the development of PIE and more specifically Germanic gender *per se* is outside the main goal of this work, and will therefore only be touched on briefly

² This system is in some ways analogous to Modern Icelandic, where morphological (i.e. declensional) factors normally assign nominal gender. As in Russian, semantic factors can override morphological gender assignment rules in Icelandic.

when it pertains to the development of Icelandic nominal gender. One of the most beneficial aspects of Schwink's (2004) treatment is that he discusses how competing semantic and morphological factors play roles in the eventual creation of the languages' individual gender systems. Aside from this larger goal, Schwink (2004) contains individual sections on gender development for the older Germanic languages.

In his section on ON, Schwink notes that in modern Icelandic, the overall tendency has been to create "a clearer morphological assignment system" (2004:42). Citing Gutenbrunner (1951:86-87), Schwink writes that this has been accomplished by a stronger connection in the minds of speakers between the gender of nouns and their respective stem-classes. An illustrative example of this is the Gmc. masculine *a*-stems, which both in ON as the modern language show a strong *-r* ending in the nominative singular, e.g. *armur*-‘arm’.³ However, the *-r* ending can also be seen in certain feminine nouns, such as *brúður*-‘bride’. Interesting here is that even though *brúður* is semantically feminine despite its masculine looking ending, during the modern period it, along with other formerly feminine nouns showing the *-r* ending like *vættur*-‘unnatural being’ and *elfur*-‘river’ which are usually feminine nouns in , can sometimes now be reanalyzed as masculine because of the stronger connection between the *-r* ending and the masculine nominal gender (Schwink 2004:43, cf. Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 1991:74). However, this does not occur everywhere and depends on the speaker. Schwink (2004:43) writes that

³ It is also important to note that Schwink (2004:43) explains that masculine loan words in this stem-class (e.g. *biskop*-‘bishop’) do not have the *-r* nominative singular ending, but are still clearly semantic masculine nouns.

the following gender assignment tables are indicative of modern Icelandic's effort to generalize nominative forms so that all forms are gender specific:

(Figure 2) Icelandic Gender Assignment

Masculine

#Stem - <i>r</i> #	strong
#Stem - <i>i</i> #	weak

Feminine

#Stem- \bigcirc #	strong
#Stem- <i>a</i> #	weak

Neuter

#Stem- \bigcirc #	strong
#Stem- <i>a</i> #	(rare) weak

Schwink (2004:43) writes that a similar desire to better correlate stem-class with gender can be seen in certain loan words from the continental Scandinavian languages, although this system is sometimes interrupted by semantic gender assignment. For example, the loan word *glögg*- 'mulled wine' (here from Danish) should be feminine because other native nouns with *ö* and with no ending are also feminine (e.g. *dögg*- 'dew'), but it is instead neuter, as other words for drinks are neuter.⁴ Schwink (2004:45) later writes, "in the event of disagreement of formal assignment and semantic assignment, semantics wins out," as with *glögg*. Thus it would seem that loan words show the

⁴ Though even here some variation is seen between *glögg**in*, fem. and *glöggið*, neut. among speakers (Schwink 2004:44).

interplay between and hierarchy of morphological and semantic factors within the (at least modern) Icelandic gender system.

In his chapter on “Agreement Marking”, Schwink also briefly discusses the diachronic development of Icelandic pronominalization. Icelandic (along with Faroese) is unique among the modern Germanic languages in that it retains the three third-person plural nominative and accusative pronoun forms from Gmc., with one pronoun for each of the three genders. The third-person plural subject forms for ON are given below:

(Table 1) Old Norse Third-Person Plural Pronouns (Noreen 1970 [1923]:314)

	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.
Pl. Nom.	<i>þeir</i>	<i>þær</i>	<i>þau</i>
Pl. Acc.	<i>þá</i>	<i>þær</i>	<i>þau</i>

In the other cases the pronominal forms become obscured, but in the nominative and accusative the gender of the pronominalized nouns can be indicated by the pronoun. This is analogous to the pronominal system of Romance languages such as Spanish. Schwink notes that when there are referents of mixed gender, it is the neuter pronoun that is used.

As an example of this, he uses the following Bible passage in modern Icelandic:

(Figure 3) Gen. 1:27-

Og Guð skapaði manninn eftir sinni mynd, hann skapaði hann

And God created the-man after his-own image he made him

eftir Guðs mynd, hann skapaði þau karl og konu.-

after God's image he made them-NPL man and woman

“And God created the man after his image, He created him after God's image, He created **them** man and woman.” (Schwink 2004:89)⁵

Here both the man (*karl*, m.) and the woman (*kona*, f.) are being created by God, and it is the neuter form *þau* that is used to refer back to them. While Wessen (1970:86) notes that in early ON the masculine third-person plural pronoun also was used with mixed gender referents, the majority of examples in ON use the neuter form.⁶ This use is preserved in Icelandic (and Faroese) from ON (Schwink 2004:89, cf. Nygaard 1906:80). Corbett (1991:283) summarizes the gender resolution rules for Icelandic as follows:

(Figure 4) Icelandic Gender Resolution Rules

- 1.) if all conjuncts are masculine, the masculine is used;
- 2.) if all conjuncts are feminine, the feminine is used;
- 3.) otherwise the neuter is used.

Braunmüller (2000) presents the discussion of Icelandic gender marking within the larger Scandinavian context. He makes the important point that while Icelandic and Faroese are common examples of modern Scandinavian languages that still retain the three-gender system from Old Norse, dialects of Norwegian (specifically those in the west and the north) do show at least some use of a feminine gender (Braunmüller

⁵Schwink does not say which Bible translation he uses here. Despite looking through several Bible translations, I was unable to find his source.

⁶ Krause (1968:138) writes that Gothic also defaulted to neuter when dealing with referents of mixed gender.

2000:25-26).⁷ At least part of the reason for this is the hybrid gender system of these dialects of Norwegian. Braunmüller notes that this is a complex system made even more so by the creation of *Nynorsk* ('New Norwegian'), one of the two official written forms of Norwegian (along with the more common *Bokmål*). *Nynorsk* retains the three-gender system of the western dialects from whence it was derived, which now exerts influence on the previously two-gender system seen in the more traditional Dano-Norwegian influenced by *Riksmål* (Braunmüller 2000:27). While some (e.g. Enger 2004) have researched the diachronic development of gender from the ON period to modern Norwegian, this unfortunately does not give many insights into the gender system of either ON or modern Icelandic.

In regards to pronominalization in Icelandic, Braunmüller draws connections between both Icelandic and German, where regardless of whether a noun is classified as animate or inanimate, the pronoun with the corresponding gender form is used. In Icelandic a neuter animate noun such as *barn*-‘child’ is pronominalized with *það*-‘it’, as well as the neuter inanimate noun *borð*-‘table’ (Braunmüller 2000:31).⁸

Braunmüller writes that in Icelandic, “there is normally no vacillation between the use of gender in the standard language and in its dialectal varieties” (Braunmüller 2000:41). This claim is tested in later sections of this report by looking diachronically at loan words in ON and their modern counterparts to see if any change in gender assignment occurred. At least in terms of loan words, Braunmüller’s (2000) claim of

⁷ It should also be noted that these dialects historically had less contact with Danish and Swedish and thus tend to retain forms closer to those of ON, at least in the lexicon.

⁸ Here he does note that in the specific case of *barn*, that gendered pronominalization, i.e. *hann*-(“he”) if a boy and *hun*-(“she”) if a girl, can be seen (Braunmüller 2000:24).

Icelandic not showing any diachronic gender vacillation is (for the most part) supported by the results of this report.

In addition to Braunmüller, Donald Steinmetz has written extensively on the historical development of nouns in Germanic, and one of the main focuses throughout his works is the development of gender in the Germanic (and to a lesser extent Slavic) languages. Steinmetz (1985) seeks to codify the Icelandic (as well as German) gender assignment system by analyzing what he calls gender tally and gender eclipse. Gender tally is the computation of different linguistic factors that compete with each other to determine the final gender assignment of a given noun. Steinmetz (1985:11) lists the following as the relevant factors for gender tally in German and Icelandic:

(Figure 5) Gender Tally Rules

1. M-rules, i.e. marked gender rules, which assign gender on the basis of morphological or phonetic shape.
2. S-rules, i.e. semantic gender rules, which assign gender on the basis of meaning.
3. SC-rules, i.e. sub-categorization rules, which apply only within the domain of certain S-rules and, depending on the domain involved, assign gender either according to morphological/phonetic shape or according to meaning.

Gender tally determines grammatical gender in nouns, but other factors such as semantic gender assignment, also interact with this system and sometimes override it. As Steinmetz (1985:13) notes, this sub-categorization of semantic gender within Icelandic

is not prevalent. Moreover, it is not particularly relevant to a diachronic analysis of loan words in the language. Thus, Steinmetz's M-and S-rules will be the main focus of this discussion.

Steinmetz describes gender eclipse as the process that occurs when more than one gender has the same value within his gender tally system presented above. When multiple genders are tied in this system, Steinmetz writes the following hierarchy is activated to resolve the tie: *masc.>fem.>neut.* (Steinmetz 1985:12). This is representative of Steinmetz' view that Icelandic is a neuter-default language, as the neuter is the final outcome when masculine and feminine assignment factors compete and no clear gender assignment can be reached.

In comparing the German and Icelandic gender systems, Steinmetz notes that many nouns that are masculine in German are neuter in Icelandic, and gives a list of several (Steinmetz 1985:19). Perhaps one of the most intriguing examples in his list are words for 'anchor' (*Anker-akkeri*). Aside from both words being loan words and deriving originally from Latin *ancora*⁹ (cf. de Vries 1997: s.v. *akkeri*, Kluge 1995: s.v. *Anker*), *Anker* is masculine but *akkeri* is neuter (Steinmetz 1985:19). Steinmetz claims that the trend of masculine German nouns being neuter in Icelandic can be explained by a single principle. Using gender tally, he compares another Latin loan in both German and Icelandic as shown below:

⁹ It should also be noted here that *ancora* is a feminine noun in Latin (cf. Simpson 1968:43). How the original gender of Latin loan words is dealt with in ON and modern Icelandic will be discussed in the data analysis section.

(Figure 6) Gender Tally Analysis of German *Brief* and Icelandic *bréf*

<u>German</u>	<u>Icelandic</u>
<i>Brief</i>	<i>bréf</i>
<u>no gender rules apply</u>	<u>no gender rules apply</u>
$\otimes m \otimes f \otimes n = m$	$\otimes m \otimes f \otimes n = n$

(Steinmetz 1985:20)

Both German *Brief* (masc.) and Icelandic *bréf* (neut.) come from Latin *breve* (neut.) (cf. de Vries 1977:s.v. *bréf*, Kluge 1995: s.v. *Brief*). Because no gender rules apply for each word in both languages, the gender tally for each word is zero, and no clear gender assignment can be determined from gender tally alone. Steinmetz (1985:20) therefore concludes that German assigns masculine as the default gender when no other clear M-rules apply (i.e. *masc.* > *fem.* > *neut.*), while Icelandic assigns neuter as the default gender (i.e. *neut.* > *masc.* > *fem.*) Due to neuter being the default gender in Icelandic, the rules for assigning masculine and feminine take on greater importance, as they must supersede the more salient neuter. Steinmetz (1985:21) writes one of the most important of these rules is that if an Icelandic noun ends in the nominative with “a segmentable morpheme consisting of the consonant *r* sometimes preceded by an unstressed vowel” then the gender of the noun will be either masculine or feminine.¹⁰

A noun that falls into this category is *dagur* (*dag*)-‘day’, where the final vowel *u* is unstressed and followed by an *r*. Another example is *kyr* (*kú*)-‘cow’, which has the

¹⁰ By “segmentable morpheme” Steinmetz means a morpheme that falls away in the accusative form of the noun and he gives the corresponding accusative forms in parentheses.

same $-(V)r$ ending. Because *dagur* follows the rule pertaining to nouns ending in $-(V)r$, it takes the masculine through gender eclipse. *Kyr*, however, deviates from this because it is semantically feminine. Because of this, the S-rules for semantically feminine animate nouns in Icelandic assign the feminine to *kyr* (Steinmetz 1985:21); Steinmetz also points out that nouns with non-segmentable final *r* do not fall into this category, for example *faðir* (*föður*)-‘father’ where the *r*-morpheme does not fall away in the accusative.

Because these words do not fall into the $-(V)r$ category, they will take neuter as default unless semantic factors push them into either the masculine or feminine. Thus, *faðir* is assigned masculine because of the noun’s natural gender (Steinmetz 1985:21).

There are other cases where the default gender in Icelandic is superseded by semantic factors. An example of a loan word that works this way follows:

(Figure 7) *biskup*-‘bishop’

male=m

1m \odot f \odot n=m

(Steinmetz 1985:22)

Although *biskup* does not have M-rules that would assign it masculine, the semantic gender of bishops as masculine overrides neuter as the gender default and assigns *biskup* masculine gender (Steinmetz 1985:21). Although Steinmetz argues that both German and Icelandic use gender tally and eclipse in their respective gender systems, he writes that, despite the example of semantic gender assignment above, “...marked gender clearly predominates in the Icelandic system in contrast to German, where marked and semantic gender participate more equally in the assignment of gender”

(Steinmetz 1985:25). For the most part, Steinmetz' conclusions about the Icelandic gender system match up with the historical data presented below.

Following Steinmetz' (1985) research on Icelandic gender assignment Trosterud (2006) looks primarily at ON gender assignment and provides us with one of the few systematic accounts of ON's gender system. While Trosterud only briefly discusses gender changes during the ON period and does not compare the ON gender system with that of modern Icelandic, he does give a statistical analysis of ON nominal gender. While Steinmetz (1985) relies heavily on a generative approach to gender assignment, Trosterud argues that this over-dependence on rules and schemata can make gender assignment look like other cognitive processes, a position that he finds dubious (Trosterud 2006:1442). He also writes that previous work on gender assignment in ON and Icelandic focuses on small rule subset, as he therefore seeks to give a comprehensive set of gender assignment for ON (Trosterud 2006:1443).

To do this, he gives the frequency of each of the three genders in different semantic fields of nouns by using Fritzner (1973). While a discussion of every one of Trosterud's semantic fields would be beyond the scope of this work, many of his findings are worth noting, as they will provide important context for the data presented in this report.

To begin, Trosterud (1973:1443) gives the following distribution of gender within Fritzner (1973):¹¹

¹¹ Trosterud (2006:1444) notes that these figures include lexicalized compounds and that the data would be different if non-compounded lexemes or only nominal roots were counted, and suggests this as an area of future research.

(Table 2) Gender Distribution among ON Nouns in Fritzner (1973)

	masc.	fem.	neut.	sum
Fritzner (#)	10594	8613	7811	27018
Fritzner (%)	39.2	31.9	28.9	100.0

As can be seen from Trosterud’s data, neuter is actually the least common gender in ON. He writes that this result seems to deviate from Steinmetz’ (1985, 2000, 2001) theory of a dominant neuter (Trosterud 2006:1444). However, Trosterud still argues for ON having neuter as the default gender, albeit in a different manner than Steinmetz. Here neuter is presented as a “weak default gender” that functions as the default when other morphological and semantic factors do not give a clear gender assignment, but is still the least-common gender in ON (Trosterud 2006:1442).

In regards to Steinmetz’s (1985:21) discussion of the assignment of masculine or feminine to words ending with the segmentable $-(V)r$ morpheme, Trosterud (2006:1447) proposes instead that all nouns with the nominative singular ending $-r$ are masculine (Trosterud 2006:1447). As noted above, there are indeed feminine nouns in ON that fall into this category. Trosterud notes that the Fritzner data contains 34 exceptions to his rule (i.e. all nouns with nom. sg. $-r$ take masculine), all of which are feminine (Trosterud 2006:1447). In addition, 31 of them were feminine *ijō* stems in Proto-Norse (ibid.).¹² Aside from the exceptions that are feminine animates (e.g. *brúðr*-‘bride’), most have no obvious semantic connection to the feminine. While Trosterud’s revisions to Steinmetz’

¹² Trosterud uses the term “Ancient Nordic.” In accordance with more current practice, I use ‘Proto-Norse.’

gender tally and eclipsis system for nouns of this type attempt to take into account more of the variability present with this type of nouns, Trosterud does not provide the reader with a clear alternative to Steinmetz' system.

Trosterud's (2006) gender assignment categories are all for either the masculine or the feminine, a fact that he claims supports Steinmetz' view that neuter is the default (Trosterud 2006:1458). While he still argues that neuter was the default gender during the ON period, Trosterud writes that there were classes of nouns that shifted gender from neuter to feminine from Proto-Norse to ON (Trosterud 2006:1458, cf. Bjorvand 1987).¹³ This, he argues, resulted in the systematic narrowing down of the neuter, and in addition ties this trend to the creation of the modern Norwegian masculine-dominant gender system that originated in ON.

As further evidence for this winnowing of the neuter beginning in the ON period, Trosterud considers loan word gender assignment in Fritzner (1973). Trosterud (2006:1459) summarizes the distribution of loanwords as follows:

(Table 3) Gender Distribution among ON Loan Words in Fritzner (1973)

Gender	Words	Percentage	Overall Percentage
masc.	196	50.0	39.2
fem.	108	27.6	31.9
neut.	88	22.4	28.9
Total	392	100.0	100.0

¹³ One example Trosterud gives here is ON *hreysi*, f.-'heap of stones' > *hreys*, n. This example appears tenuous, as Cleasby & Vigfusson (1957: s.v. *hreysi*) show *hreysi* as only a neuter in ON (however, it does take the nominative feminine plural form *hreysar*).

Trosterud's (2006) data show fifty percent of ON loan words as being masculine, making it the most common gender for loan words. Surprisingly neuter is the least commonly assigned gender for loan words. Of note here is some variation between masculine and neuter gender assignment for loan words ending in *-i* in the nominative singular (Trosterud 2006:1459). He writes that the *-i* ending will assign masculine unless some other factor comes into play (Trosterud 2006:1449). These loan words with final *-i* are declined like weak masculine native words, as in the following table from Noreen (1970:276):

(Table 4) Weak *an*-Stem Declension

Sing.	masc.	neut.	Pl.	masc.	neut.
Nom.	-i, -e	-a	Nom.	-ar	-u, -o
Gen.	-a	-a	Gen.	-a	-na
Dat.	-a	-a	Dat.	-um, -om	-um, -om
Acc.	-a	-a	Acc.	-a	-u, -o

In his discussion of the division between neuter and masculine for the loan words falling into this category, Trosterud notes that of the 80 loan words found in Fritzner (1973) ending with *-i*, 22 have the suffix *-ari*, which assigns the masculine (Trosterud 2006:1459). An example of this is *riddari*-‘rider, horseman, knight’ <MLG *riddere* (Trosterud 2006:459, cf. de Vries 1977: s.v. *riddari*). This statement is not a problem in itself, but Trosterud's data analysis that follows it is. He goes on to say that after the 22 nouns in this group with the *-ari* suffix, “40 of the remaining **60** are indeed masculine.”

(Trosterud 2006:1459, emphasis added) Here there should only be 58 remaining nouns in this group and not 60 as he writes. In any case, this group of loan words ending in *-i* shows variation between masculine and neuter, although the majority are masculine.¹⁴ Nouns of this group are discussed further below.

Trosterud still agrees with Steinmetz (1985, 2001) that neuter is the default gender in ON, but writes that it is a weak default gender and lies “outside the semantic base of the system”, and cites ON loan word data as evidence for neuter being weak (Trosterud 2006:1460). However, he writes that due to masculine having the greatest number of nouns assigned to in ON, the neuter default rule should not be taken for granted and suggests further investigation (Trosterud 2006:1462). In the end, Trosterud (2006) attempts to discuss the topic in a more data-driven way than Steinmetz (1985), but his data and subsequent morphological and semantic rules for gender assignment in ON are unfortunately not clearly presented and do not bring the reader to a better understanding of ON gender assignment. This, coupled with the data problems discussed above, makes his account somewhat problematic.

III. Loan Word Data and Analysis

While Trosterud (2006) deals with ON, the main goal of his diachronic analysis is to show how the ON gender assignment system developed in modern Norwegian. This report looks to see if Steinmetz’ (1985), as well as Trosterud’s (2006) more recent revision of Steinmetz (1985), observations about gender assignment in ON and modern

¹⁴ However, after his previous error in calculation it is difficult to take Trosterud at his word here.

Icelandic match up when applied to an analysis of loan word gender assignment from both periods.

The loan words from ON analyzed here are culled from specific examples given by Steinmetz (1985), and/or Trosterud (2006). Snorri Sturlson's *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar* (Saga of Ólaf Tryggvason) found in the *Heimskringla* (History of the Kings of Norway) is used as the primary source of examples for loan words (Snorri 1911). As this is an account of the Christianization of Norway, a fair amount of loan words from Latin (mostly religious terms) are found in the text. Examples for loan words are also taken from *Laxdæla Saga*, one of the Icelandic family or "historical" sagas. The saga is unique among the Icelandic family sagas in that it displays many features of continental medieval romances, and because of this continental loans appear there more frequently than in other sagas (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934:xi).¹⁵ It is for this reason that this historical source is used in this report. Examples for the same loan words in modern Icelandic are taken from the *Mörkuð Íslenk Málheid* ("Tagged Icelandic Corpus") based at the Árni Magnússon Institute.¹⁶ This online corpus contains around 25 million words from varied modern sources such as books, printed newspapers, and blogs.¹⁷ None of the loan words that this report investigated changed their gender assignment from ON to modern Icelandic. A discussion of those that retained their ON genders follows.

¹⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934:xi) writes, "*Það er meira að segja óhætt að fullyrða, að frásögn Laxdæla sé beinlínis sniðin eftir einhverri riddarasögu...*" - "It is even safe to say that the narrative of Laxdæla is modeled on courtly prose..." and connects the text to medieval French sources through the use of heraldic tropes.

¹⁶ All examples for loan words in modern Icelandic are taken from this corpus, and are cited with the tags given to them in the corpus search.

¹⁷ The loan words analyzed in this report were drawn from Trosterud (2006), Steinmetz (1985) and Schwink (2004), and do not correspond to one particular semantic class or morphological declension pattern. It would be beneficial for future research to analyze ON loan words of one specific type.

- *riddari*, masc.<MLG *riddere*-‘knight’: This was a late borrowing into ON (de Vries 1977:444). The word’s MLG masculine gender was also maintained after its borrowing.

An ON example of *riddari* follows:

(Figure 8)

Óláfr segir nafn sitt og spurði, hverr sá væri inn vaskligi riddari, er
 Olaf says name his and asks, who that would-be the valiant knight-MSG, whom
hann átti þá tal við.
 he possessed then speech with (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934:56)
 ‘Olaf gave his name and asked who the valiant knight was with whom he was
 speaking.’ (Arent 1964:50)

The loan is given the ON suffix *–ari*, which assigns masculine (cf. Trosterud 2006:1459), most likely due to its similarity to the original MLG *–ere* suffix, in addition to the strong semantic connection of knights with men in the Middle Ages.

A modern instance of the word follows:

(Figure 9)

Ákvedin, bjartsýnn og sterkur riddari-
 determined optimistic and strong knight-MSG
 ‘A determined, optimistic and strong knight’ (BAEKUR- B1W)

Riddari is still masculine in modern Icelandic, again most likely because of the semantic nature of knights predominantly being males (besides the morphological rule mentioned above). This supports Trosterud’s (2006:1443) argument that semantic factors are most important in ON.

- *akkeri*, neut.<lat. *ancora*- ‘anchor, hook’: *akkeri* is assigned the neuter when it is borrowed into ON (de Vries 1977:4). The assignment of the neuter to *akkeri* in ON is also distinctive because of its assignment to the masculine in OE as well as in OHG (de

Vries 1977:s.v. *akkeri*, Kluge 1995:s.v. *Anker*). That ON assigned neuter to the word when other contemporary Germanic languages of the time assigned the masculine could be further evidence for Steinmetz' (1985) argument for a neuter default in ON. The following example is from *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar* and describes a sea battle between King Ólaf and a combined Danish and Swedish fleet:

(Figure 10)

Frambyggjar á Orminun langa ok Orminun skamma ok Trananum
 forward-men on serpent long and serpent short and crane
færðu akkeri ok stafnljá í skip Sveins konung...
 threw anchors-NPL and grappling hooks in ship of Svein king

(Finnur Jónsson 1911:176)

‘The men stationed in the forecastle of the Long Serpent, the Short Serpent, and the Crane hurled anchors and grappling hooks onto the ship of King Svein...’

(Hollander 1991:235)

Akkeri is similar to another neuter loan word in ON, *rekendi*-‘chain’. Trosterud (2006:1459) notes the morphological rule that nouns ending in *-i*, as well as the semantic rule that loan words for concrete objects also are assigned the masculine (Trosterud 2006:1459). *Rekendi* is neuter, which seems to break both of these rules in that it is at once a loan denoting a concrete object and ends in *-i* (ibid.). *Akkeri* here seems to also contradict Trosterud’s view, and the addition of another exception to his gender assignment rules for this kind of loan could call for a further re-evaluation of his criteria. *Akkeri* has retained the neuter into the modern language, and an example of it follows:

(Figure 11)

Kaupamenn náðu ekki upp akkeri sínu.

merchants pulled not up anchors-NPL their

‘The merchants did not pull up their anchor.’ (BAEKUR-B11)

-*stræti*, neut.<lat. *strāta* (de Vries 1977:s.v. *stræti*): While the path of its transmission from Latin to ON is disputed,¹⁸ *stræti* behaves much like *akkeri* above. Both are loans ending in *-i* and became neuter when borrowed into ON. In addition, both have maintained their assignment to neuter in modern Icelandic. The following is an example of *stræti* in ON:

(Figure 12)

Ólafur konungr gekk einn dag úti á stræti, en menn nökkurir gengu

Olaf king went one day out on street-NSG and men certain go

í moti þeim, ok sá, er fyrstr gekk, fagnaði konungi

in against them and he who first went greeted king

(Finnur Jónsson 1911:162)

‘One day King Ólaf was walking in the street with some followers when several men met them, and the man at their head greeted the king well.’

(Hollander 1991:216)

An example of *stræti* in Icelandic follows:

(Figure 13)

Við spássemuðum um stræti¹⁹ hinnar massívu borgar.

we strolled through streets-NPL those massive of-city

‘We strolled through streets of the massive city’ (BAEKUR-B2V).

¹⁸ De Vries writes that some claim *stræti* was borrowed through OE *stræt*, while others posit it was borrowed through Middle Irish *strait* (de Vries 1977:s.v.*stræti*).

¹⁹ Note that these nouns also do not take plural endings in the nominative and accusative.

Also interesting to note about the neuter loans *stræti* and *akkeri* is that while they appear to be like weak n-stems (cf. Table 3), they were in fact borrowed into the weak declension in ON which ends in $-i^{20}$ and have remained there in modern Icelandic. While Trosterud (2006:1449) does include a discussion of native masculine nouns that have $-i$ in the nominative and $-a$ in the oblique (cf. Noreen 1970:276), he does not discuss how or why certain loan words, such as those discussed here, tend to be borrowed into this noun type.

-prestr, masc. <lat. *presbyter* < gr. *πρεσβύτερος* (*presbyteros*)-‘priest’ (de Vries 1977:428): Not surprisingly, *prestr* takes the masculine in ON. It shows the ending $-(V)r$, which according to Steinmetz (1985:21) should assign either the masculine or the feminine. Interesting here is that aside from many ON loan words ending in $-(V)r$ (e.g. *klaustr* as discussed below), the original Latin form *presbyter* also has the same $-(V)r$ ending. This, coupled with the strong semantic association of priests with males, leaves no wonder as to why *prestr* is masculine in ON. An example follows:

(Figure 14)

Þá er Óláfr konungr Tryggvason hafði verið ii. (sic.) vetr konungr at
 then when Olaf king Tryggvason had been two winters king in
Nóregi, var með honum saxnestr prestr sá er nefndr er Þangbrandr
 Norway was with him Saxon priest-MSG he who named is Thangbrand
 (Finnur Jónsson 1911:155)
 ‘When King Óláfr Tryggvason has been king of Norway for two years, there was
 at his court a Saxon priest called Thangbrand.’ (Hollander 1991:209)

²⁰ These nouns are commonly referred to simply as neuter nouns, and not much attention is given to them in ON grammars (e.g. Noreen 1970).

Its gender assignment has not changed in the modern language, most likely due to the combined strength of the morphological and given above. A modern example follows:

(Figure 15)

Pabbi minn er prestur í Rekjavík, þú kannst við hann-
father my is priest-MSG in Rekjavík you are-known with him
'My father is a priest in Rekjavík, you know him' (BAEKUR-B1A)

-klaustr, neut.<OE *clauster*< lat. *claustrum* –‘cloister, monastery’ (de Vries 1977:s.v. *klaustr*): *Klaustr* is unique among the loan words analyzed in this report in that some claim it was borrowed into ON through OE. Although it has the *-(V)r* ending like *prestr*, *klaustr* instead takes the neuter in both ON and modern Icelandic. When the Latin *claustrum* was borrowed into OE as *clauster*, it retained the original’s neuter gender (Borden 1982:s.v. *clauster*) This retention of the original gender assignment then could very likely have influenced the word’s taking the neuter when it was borrowed a second time into ON.

Another likely reason is that *klaustr*, unlike *prestr*, does not have a strong semantic connection to the masculine gender. However, Steinmetz’ (1985) *-(V)r* rule should then have assigned *klaustr* to either the masculine or feminine via gender tally. Here the noun’s original Latin gender could be what trumps this morphological rule. That this could be the case is further cause for a re-evaluation of Steinmetz’ (and thereby Trosterud’s) views as to morphological gender assignment rules for words with the *-(V)r* ending. An ON attestation of *klaustr* follows:

(Figure 16)

*Magnús, er blindaðr hafði verit, fór síðan í Niðarós ok gaf
Magnus when blind had been traveled afterwards in Nitharos and gave
sik í klaustr ok tók við munklæðum.
himself in cloister-NSG and took with monk-clothing*

(Finnur Jónsson 1911:566)²¹

‘Magnús, when deprived of his eyesight, travelled to Nitharós and there entered
the cloister, taking a monk’s habit.’ (Hollander 1991:730-31)

A modern corpus example (with the modern spelling *klaustur*) is found below:

(Figure 17)

*Þar voru fjölmargar kirkjur og klaustur sem
there were great-many churches and cloisters-NPL that
þeir rændu og brenndu
they plundered and burned*

‘There were numerous churches and monasteries which they plundered and
burned.’ (BAEKUR-B3E)

- *kerti*, neut.<MLG *kerte*²²- ‘candle’ (de Vries 1977: s.v. *kerti*): *Kerti* functions like
akkeri and *stræti* above. It ends in -(C)*i* and is neuter in both ON and modern Icelandic.

When *stræti*, *akkeri*, and *kerti* were borrowed into ON, they were all assigned to the
neuter. None of them were borrowed into the neuter in other older Germanic languages.

Kluge notes that Lat. *ancora* was borrowed as *ankar* in OHG and was masculine, as it is
today in modern German (Kluge 1995:s.v. *Anker*). Lat. *strata* was borrowed as a

²¹ This example is taken from the *Magnúss Saga Blinda og Haralds Gilla* (The Saga of Magnús the Blind and Harald Gilli) also found in the *Heimskringla*, as no attestation of *klaustr* could be found in *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar*.

²² De Vries notes MLG *kerte* was most likely itself borrowed from Lat. *charta*-‘papyrus’, however Kluge (1995:s.v. *Kerze*) writes that the origin of this word is still unclear.

feminine in OHG (*strāza*), OS (*strāta*), as well as in OE (*stræt*) (Kluge 1995:s.v. *Straße*).

An ON example of *kerti* follows:

(Figure 18)

Sigurðr byskup tók allan mesuskrúða sinn ok gekk fram

Sigurth bishop took all vestments his and went forth

í stafn á konungsskipi, lét tendra kerti ok bar reykelsi

in prow on king's-ship let tinder candles-NPL and bore incense

(Finnur Jónsson 1911:159)

‘Bishop Sigurth put on all his vestments and went forward to the prow of the king’s ship, had tapers lit and incense borne’ (Snorri 1991:213).

As with other neuter ON loan words ending in *-(C)i*, the noun is uninflected in

nominative and accusative plural as seen in the example above. An example of *kerti* in

Modern Icelandic is shown below:

(Figure 19)

Sófaborðið var líka dúkað og kerti loguðu

coffee-table was also covered and candles-NPL burned

viðsvegar um íbúðina.

(BAEKUR-B0A)

around in apartment

‘The coffee table was also covered and candles burned around the apartment.’

- *messa*, fem.<OLG *messa*<Lat. *missa*- “mass” (de Vries 1977:385)- *Messa* retained its

original feminine gender from Latin when it came into ON. An example of *messa* in ON

follows:

(Figure 20)

Þá kom Mikjálsmessa; lét konungr þá halda mjök,
 then came Michelmas-FSG let king then hold greatly
lét syngva messu hátliðiga
 let be-sung mass-FSG solemnly (Finnur Jónsson 1911:161)
 ‘Now came Michelmas. The king had it observed strictly and had mass sung
 solemnly’ (Snorri 1991:215).

Like the other loan words discussed here, *mess*a did not change its gender assignment in modern Icelandic. A modern corpus example can be found below:

(Figure 21)

Á páskadag er messa.
 on Easter-day is mass-FSG
 ‘On Easter Sunday there is mass.’ (BAEKUR-B00)

Here *mess*a was borrowed into the weak *ōn*-stem noun paradigm. Noreen (1970:279) describes these nouns as consisting of almost only feminine nouns, and gives the following table of the weak *ōn*-stem declension pattern:

(Table 5) Weak *ōn*-Stem Declension

Sg.	fem.	Pl.	fem.
Nom.	-a	Nom.	-ur, -or
Gen.	-u, -o	Gen.	-na
Dat.	-u, -o	Dat.	-um, -om
Acc.	-u, -o	Acc.	-ur, or

Trosterud (2006:1459) notes that other loan words in ON that end in *-a* also tend to be borrowed into this same paradigm and are assigned the feminine, e.g. *planka*-‘plank’,

presenta-‘present’, *persóna*-‘person’. This follows the ON gender assignment rule for native nouns ending in *-a* in the nominative (ibid.) Here, however, there are notable exceptions to this rule when the loans have a strong semantic connection to males. Of note are *herra*-‘master’, *junkera*-‘childe, nobleman’, *papa*-‘pope’, and *síra*-‘master, sir’, all of which are masculine in ON (Trosterud 2006:1448).

IV. Conclusion

That none of these related languages of the period assigned the neuter sets ON apart, and appears to give credence to Steinmetz’ view of what he calls “The Great Gender Shift”, wherein the gender assignment system of West Germanic shifted away from the previously neuter-default Germanic languages (e.g. ON and Gothic) and took masculine as the new default gender (Steinmetz 2001). Semantic factors could also have played a role in at least some of these loan words maintaining the genders they were given when originally borrowed into ON. In the cases of *riddari*-‘knight’ and *prestr*-‘priest’, both have a clear masculine semantic nature and it is no surprise that both stayed masculine.²³

In all, Steinmetz’ (1985, 2001) theory of Icelandic’s (and in this case also ON’s) being a neuter-default language appears to hold true, especially when one looks at neuter loans with an *-i* ending like *akkeri* and *straeti*. These nouns do not have any particularly strong semantic factors that could assign them to any specific gender, and thus become neuter. However, the fact that semantic and morphological factors as discussed above can

²³ It should be noted that *riddari*-‘knight’ is by nature an archaic term for a profession that never existed in Iceland. While not as important as the more obvious semantic connection of knights with men, this could also be a contributing factor to the word’s retention of the masculine.

override this neuter-default assignment solidifies Trosterud's argument for a weak neuter-default gender system in ON (cf. Trosterud 2006:1442). That none of the loan words analyzed in this report changed their gender from masculine to neuter, as the West Germanic languages (and for that matter the modern Scandinavian languages) did (cf. Steinmetz 2001, Braunmüller 2000:26), shows that the gender assignment system of modern Icelandic remains (barring any future discovery of gender vacillation) unchanged. This in turn supports Schwink (2004:99) when he writes that the modern Icelandic gender assignment system remains relatively unchanged from that of ON. Future research on the gender assignment of loan words in Modern Icelandic could allow one to see if Icelandic still is a neuter-default language.

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